



BLACK LACQUER WRITING DESK ("BUREAU EN PENTE")

JACQUES DUBOIS (1694-1763)

Circa: 1745

Paris, Louis XV period, c. 1745/49

Stamped 'IDUBOIS' and 'JME'

Corpus: oak, spruce; French lacquer

Panels: Southern Chinese Export ware: natural-coloured lacquer decorated with different coloured lacquer and oil colour

Mounts: bronze, cast, chased, fire-gilded (stamped "C couronné")

Fitted with: brown, gold-tooled morocco leather

H. 90.5 cm (901/2 in.), w. 72 cm (281/4 in.), d. 42 cm (161/2 in.)

Comparable pieces

Chicago, The Art Institute of Chicago (Inv.Nr. 1973.385); Paris, formerly in a private collection (published in: Pierre Kjellberg, *Le Mobilier français du XVIIIe siècle. Dictionnaire des ébénistes et des menuisiers*, Paris 1989, p. 269, Fig. G.); Sagan, formerly collection of Duc de Talleyrand (published in: Hans Huth, *Lacquer of the West. The history of a craft and an industry 1550-1950*, Chicago/London 1971, Fig. 228).

Four tall, "S"-shaped cabriole legs carry this delicate lady's writing desk, which is equipped with an inclined writing flap. The legs lead directly without transitional elements into the wide curved rail. While the sides of this piece of softly curved piece of furniture are concave, the writing flap, rail and top are flat. In contrast the back wall is modelled in a lively way so that the piece could be positioned freely in a room.

By opening the sculpted writing flap the glowing red lacquered interior of the top part of this piece of furniture is revealed. It is divided horizontally into three levels: the upper one is an open storage surface, the lower levels consist of two drawers with curved fronts above each other on the right and the left, the two on the right are false drawers that conceal a single box that can be pulled out (known as a *coffre-fort*), and which can be locked separately. There is an open pigeon-hole at the centre with a drawer below it. This has three internal compartments in which the writing utensils were originally kept. A sliding panel fitted in flat area in front of the drawers can be slid backwards to reveal a further compartment.

The areas at the sides of the desk and the surfaces of the top element are clad with Southern Chinese lacquer panels whose motifs are continued outside the bronze framing by French black lacquer work. This deep black French lacquer contrasts in colour with the brownish-black ground of the Chinese lacquer. The idealized depictions of landscapes and the floral motifs are in shades of green, blue[1], red and gold. The rail, writing flap and flat area are decorated with mountainous river landscapes featuring lake dwellings built on stilts, water pavillions, bridges, trees and shrubs, while the small floral islands on the sides are frequented by butterflies and feature peonies[2] and stylised chrysanthemums.

The bronze decoration, which is of high quality, is stamped at several places with the crowned C mark[4] and is made completely in an animated Rococo style that, above all, underlines the structure of the piece of furniture. The guiding motif is profiled bronze bands that emphasise the contours and form curved frames that surround the lacquer panels. At some places a painted gold edging bead is substituted for the bronze band. The delicate sabots are in the shape of a cartouche flanked by "C" curves and on the inner faces of the legs are divided up into three foliate motifs. Three bronze strands that start from each of the shoes run along the outside edges of the legs. The central band that leads into spreading corner bronzes evenly decorated with foliate work. The corner bronzes are made up of curves and counter-curves surrounded by foliate work and blossoms and are terminated by an oval cartouche with shell edging.

Alongside B.V.R.B., Joseph Baumhauer and Pierre Migeon, Jacques Dubois (1694-1763) was among the most important Parisian ébénistes during the reign of Louis XV. At the start of his career he worked as a self-employed cabinet-maker in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, only registering his master craftsman's certificate at the advanced age of 49 and opening a workshop on Rue de Charenton, which he ran for almost twenty years. The products of his creative work that have survived to the present day provide us with information about the prosperity of the ébéniste, who must have cultivated business relationships with a number of the most important Parisian marchands merciers. The large number of stamped pieces of furniture with panels of Chinese or Japanese lacquer, exquisite and costly products from the Far East supplied to the ébénistes by the marchands merciers,

seem to confirm these relationships.

Dubois was able to respond to both the latest developments and the wishes of his aristocratic clientele. Accordingly he produced furniture with French lacquer decoration, known as vernis Martin.

This writing table is an exquisite example of Dubois' furniture, lavishly decorated with lacquer and characterised by soft wavy lines, precisely worked bronze mounts and the skilled use of costly Asian and French lacquer. The Parisian lacquer workers (known as *v*) with whom Dubois worked included Joseph Huitre, who also made panels for the Poirier, Duvaux, Lebrun and Machart. With regard to the last mentioned we know that he commissioned lacquer furniture from Dubois. The piece of furniture presented here may well be among these. Numerous, very similar lady's writing tables have survived from Dubois' workshop which have finely chased, in some cases identical, bronze mounts and which feature matt grained and highly polished areas. In an inventory compiled after his death in 1763 mention is made among other of: "one bureau in Chinese lacquer with gilt-bronze mounts, 220L"; "one small secrétaire in Japanese lacquer, priced 200L"; "one commode 4 ½ pieds in length in Chinese lacquer decorated 'à grands cartels' [with large bronze mounts], 2 large encoignures also in Chinese lacquer 'à cartels' [with mounts] priced 1,000L" [with 2 serre-papiers]; "one bureau, almost completed, with mounts 'à cartel en noir' [ungilt] and veneered with lacquer, one secrétaire in Chinese lacquer with its bronze mounts, altogether 400L". Alongside various pieces of furniture the list also includes a large number of bronze mounts clearly intended to be mounted later to pieces of furniture.

[1] The blue parts are most probably painted in oil colour as there was no East Asian blue rhus lacquer.

[2] In Chinese symbolism the peony is regarded as the "queen of the flowers", as a symbol of the wealth, nobility and elegance of a young woman. One of the flowers of the four seasons, it refers to spring.

[3] As it flowers in autumn, when it is already cooler, the chrysanthemum is regarded as a symbol of courage. It also stands for a long life, for constancy, modesty and eternal love.

[4] The "C couronné" is a taxation mark, that had to be applied to all metal alloys that contained copper (cuivre). As this tax was only raised between 1745 and 1749, pieces bearing this stamp can be precisely dated to this period.

[5] Leg edges with flower stems and small scattered flowers of gold bronze are frequently found in Dubois' furniture and seem to be a characteristic detail of the work of this ébéniste.

[6] Quoted from Alexandre Pradère, French Furniture Makers. The Art of the Ébéniste from Louis XIV to the Revolution, London 1989, p. 170.

